

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE EARLY POETRY OF YOCHAVED BAT-MIRIAM*

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ABSTRACT: In her early poetry Yochaved Bat-Miriam explores issues of religious experience. The religious poems published in the early 1920s, which have much in common with her love poems of that period, reflect the poet's attempt to draw upon biblical imagery in order to create an unorthodox personal mythology that expresses her relationship to the divine. In poems published in the late 1920s and early 1930s the poet writes of her difficulty in relating to the traditional God of Israel. Using traditional Jewish language, she portrays her relationship to a divine being who is revealed to her from beyond this world. During both periods the divine being is portrayed as masculine, but in some poems as feminine. The poet's relationship to the divine arises from her attempt to respond, on the one hand, to her anxiety aroused by unrequited love, feelings of guilt and loneliness, and fear of death, and on the other hand, to her belief in the worthwhileness of her existence.

When the Hebrew poet Yochaved Bat-Miriam (1901–1980) was considering the publication of her collected works, she intended at first not to include any selections from her first collection of poetry, *Meraḥoq* (*From Afar*, 1932). In a conversation with the critic Dan Miron (1980, pp. 7–12) she reportedly justified the rejection of her early poetry by saying, "That is another poet, that is not I." In the end she agreed to include only a very limited selection of her earliest work in the volume of collected poems published in 1963 under the title *Širim* (*Poems*).

In excluding from *Širim* such a large number of poems from the *Meraḥoq* collection, Bat-Miriam sacrificed many poems which explored issues of religious experience that had been of central concern to her at the

* This article is based on a paper presented at the Tenth Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies (1978). My interest in and understanding of the poetry of Yochaved Bat-Miriam began with my participation in a graduate seminar under the direction of Professor Arnold J. Band at the University of California, Los Angeles.

beginning of her poetic career.¹ It would appear that in later life it was difficult for her to affirm her first attempts to express the nature of her religious concerns. Nevertheless, if we are to understand the poetry of Bat-Miriam as a whole, it is crucial that we study her early youthful religious poems.² The development of this poetry may be divided into two periods: (1) the early 1920s, when Bat-Miriam lived in Europe, and (2) the late 1920s and early 1930s, the period of her final years in Europe and of her emigration to the Land of Israel.

1. The Early 1920s³

Bat-Miriam's religious poetry of this period can be understood by comparing it to her love poetry, with which it has much in common.⁴ Her love poetry of the early 1920s portrays the poet's efforts to come to terms with the experience of unrequited love. At times she feels a sense of purity in the hope and expectation that she will be able to unite with the male lover for whom she longs. At other times she is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and worthlessness, and she assumes that she will never be able to overcome the distance between herself and her lover.

In an early love poem (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 12–13), the speaker begins by describing an experience of longing for her lover in a spirit of purity and hopefulness:

... I have said since then:
In a white dress,
bright and pure,
alone, for you
I wait.
Alone from afar in silence I stand,
longing and expectant.
And the sad blue stripes,
spread out in desiring, attentive wonder,
above my head

1. For discussions of religious themes in *Meraḥoq* see Lachower (1932), Miron (1963), and Kartun-Blum (1977). A bibliography of Bat-Miriam's writings and of critical works on the poetry of Bat-Miriam can be found in Kartun-Blum (1977, pp. 165–175).

2. The later collections of Bat-Miriam's poetry (1937, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1946, 1963) reflect the development of the poet's religious concerns throughout her career.

3. The religious poetry of this period was collected in the section titled "Meraḥoq" ("From Afar") in the collection *Meraḥoq* (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 3–56). All the translations of Bat-Miriam's poetry in this article are mine.

4. See Kartun-Blum (1977, pp. 72–73).

at the ends of the lofty heavens,
 are reflected in my eyes
 in alert pining,
 like a pure tear.
 And together with the shadows of the trees,
 transparent and musing
 as if caught in a dream—
 a bridge of splendid mysteries
 is woven between us
 by hidden yearnings,
 like thin blue threads.
 This have I said,
 and alone,
 longing and expectant,
 for you I waited.

The speaker believes that her longing is shared by the heavens and by her lover. The pining which her eyes express is a reflection of the desiring "sad blue stripes" (*passey hattakelet hannugim*) of the heavens. These blue stripes correspond to the "thin blue threads" (*hutey takelet daqqim*) of mutual yearnings which are woven together as a bridge between herself and her lover. Although she is not yet united with her lover, in her longing and desire she feels at one with him.

Suddenly, the self-portrait of the speaker is transformed:

And how did another come?
 How was the whiteness of my pure dress
 turned into a sign of heavy mourning,
 its quick, thin, spreading plaits,
 lengthened, widened,
 and descended like snakes,
 twisting around my feet;
 and my head held high—was bent to the earth.
 How heavy were my shoulders and weakened,
 how like a stone on my soul presses the muteness of my sin,
 and my eyes, ashamed,
 are straying and seeking.
 (1922)

The white dress, symbol of the purity of her longing for her lover, turns into snakes, symbol of the sinfulness of her erotic desires.⁵ It is only for a limited period of time that she is able to preserve her sense of purity as she waits for her worth to be confirmed by union with her lover. Her

5. See Kartun-Blum (1977, p. 75).

failure to unite with him suggests to her that her desires, which she had seen as the source of union between herself and her lover, are actually the very barrier that comes between them. Instead of making her pure and worthy, her desires make her sinful and unacceptable to the lover for whom she longs. Her eyes no longer express the pure desires of the heavens, but rather look down to earth in guilt, shame, and confusion, as she mourns the loss of her hope.

At times she is able to overcome her feelings of guilt and worthlessness and to believe in the purity of her erotic desires. In one poem (*Bat-Miriam*, 1932, pp. 23-25), she writes of her success in affirming the worth of her desire for her distant lover:

I forgot my sin today,
 I did not remember it.
 As before, proud, pure,
 and a young dawn lighting up my face,
 your name from afar
 I called.
 From afar—and I do not draw near to you.

She refuses to submit to the feelings of guilt that arose during her silent longing for her lover and returns to that longing and imbibes it as if it were an intoxicating beverage which arouses in her the fiery erotic passion she has felt in the past for her lover:⁶

Full of hardness
 and great rebellion,
 I added to them,
 and dregs of hidden silence
 I drank to the bottom of the glass,
 I turned it over
 and sucked to the end.
 And my soul became drunk
 and went wild
 and rose up in a blaze.

As the speaker abandons herself to her passions, she sees before her a scene of trembling tree shadows resting on a smooth stream:

rising in broad purple flames
 on the threshold of a pale dawn
 among the shadows of perplexed trees,

6. Kartun-Blum (1977, pp. 82-83) interprets fire in *Bat-Miriam's* early love poetry as a symbol of the poet's erotic desire.

trembling
 and moving,
 moving and wandering
 and turning back,
 and on the smoothness of the nearby stream,
 like a bridge between its two banks,
 resting in the tranquility of silent submission.

The stream which provides a connecting bridge between its two banks is reminiscent of the bridge of thin blue threads of yearnings which in her imagination tied the speaker to her lover in the previous poem. As the two banks are united by the stream, and as the tree shadows rest tranquilly upon it, so the speaker envisions the fulfillment of her erotic desires when she will be united with her lover.

She is torn, however, between two emotional extremes. On the one hand, she recalls her feeling that her love is doomed to failure, and that all she can do is to mourn her loss, even as she declares her desire to unite with her lover:

Like flames of fire
 my soul rising drunk,
 and I knew not,
 and my hand since then
 to you I stretched,
 and for mourning I cried!

On the other hand, she rebelliously insists on pursuing her desire for love as if it will ultimately be fulfilled. She believes that someone is calling to her from afar, that her distant lover yearns for her as much as she does for him:

But full of hardness
 and great rebellion,
 defiant and wild,
 how can I utter a dirge?
 How can I cry for a quiet rebellious mourning?
 And my hurt so heavy in me
 cries at length,
 as if demanding and jealous.
 And I yielded to the secrets of distances that call
 in my trembling yearnings,
 I yielded, I was summoned,
 and as before, I stood,
 my head erect and my eyes amazed,
 and to you I called,
 from afar,
 to the one.
 (1922)

Nevertheless, the speaker is unable to achieve the desired union between herself and her lover. As a victim of unrequited love, she is merely able to exclaim in protest against her fate:

For greater than before is my love for you
and is this shame that I know,
and on my love I prostrate myself and wail,
on my love crucified like me
I wail and roar.

In her early love poetry Bat-Miriam frequently uses religious imagery to describe her response to unrequited love. The poet senses a connection between the experience of love and religious experience, and she conveys that connection by alluding to traditional Jewish literature. She describes the longing for the lover with such words as '*oreget* 'longing', *niksepet* 'desiring', *kāmiha* 'pining', and *ga'agu'im* 'yearnings'. These are terms used by traditional Jewish texts to compare the human longing for God and the human longing for a lover. Furthermore, the view that sin is a barrier between herself and her lover alludes to the traditional Jewish notion of sin as an obstacle to human acceptance by God.

During this period the poet writes in similar terms of both her love experiences and her religious experiences. The feelings of desire and longing, guilt, failure, and rebellious reaffirmation of the worth of her desires expressed in Bat-Miriam's early love poetry appear as well in her early religious poetry. In the religious poetry the poet finds relief from the loneliness and guilt aroused by unrequited love when she discovers the existence of a divine being who is willing to accept her love. The divine being thereby replaces the human lover as the object of the poet's desire and longing.

In one of her earliest religious poems (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 7-8), the speaker tells of a vision in which she is seized by fire:

A great fire,
greater than the day's sunlight,
seized the forelock of my burning head,
rose up into my eyes,
trembled on my lips,
and inflamed my hands and feet—
which were carried like winds
in inanimate thirsty deserts.
And it raised me up—
exposed
and open before the four winds of the earth,

and before a shouting and bursting sun
 presented me,
 burning seven times more than it,
 evil,
 seized by flames of fire,
 with a wild wail on my lips,
 before the day's sun.
 (1922)

The poem alludes to a passage in Ezekiel Chapter 8, in which the prophet sees a fiery vision of God and is seized by the forelock of his head (*bəṣīṣit rō'šî*). Ezekiel is then carried off by a wind and taken to Jerusalem, where God shows him "the great abominations which the House of Israel are committing" in the Temple. The poet has transformed Ezekiel's vision of a fiery God who causes the prophet to view Israel's evil into a vision of a cruel sun-god who implants an evil fiery passion within the speaker and shouts at her.⁷ In contrast to Ezekiel's God, who enlists the prophet as an ally against the forces of evil, the divine being revealed is himself the source of evil. Her response to this evil divine being is to cry out in anguish and protest.

Bat-Miriam's early religious poetry conveys her longing to discover the image of a divine being who could serve as a positive alternative to the cruel, uncaring image of the shouting, bursting sun-god. In a poem published at the same time as her dream poem (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 9-11), she tells of finding such an image in the form of a male lover-god.⁸ In this poem the loneliness and depression of the speaker are portrayed as a confrontation between herself and the dark abysses of night's silence. Her response to this confrontation is to make a religious offering to the abysses of silence, as if they represent a god whom she must appease in order to find relief from her dejection. Her offering consists of her very own soul:

I take out my soul,
 and on my palms I lift
 and bear on high,
 in a hidden, deep, whispered prayer,
 before the abysses of silence, which rose up before me
 in the darkness of this night.

7. We have seen similar erotic fire imagery in the early love poetry of Bat-Miriam (1932, pp. 23-25).

8. Kartun-Blum (1977, p. 73) suggests that this poem is one of those of this period which "perhaps really turns to a transcendental object." My analysis below demonstrates that this is indeed the case with this poem.

The absence of an object for the verbs "lift" and "bear" suggests that in offering up her soul, the speaker is not merely removing a part of herself, but is offering up her whole self to the abysses of silence. She then describes a vision which is revealed to her from the depths of these abysses:

Abysses of silence rose up before me,
 and in the depths of depths were revealed
 sounds, echoes resounding
 and coming from afar,
 flowing, uniting, and raising to my eyes movements,
 light, quivering, trembling,
 from above to below,
 from east to west,
 from north to south,
 like the rustling of wings quiet and hurried,
 and opposite them colors
 woven in different directions,
 concentrating
 and embroidering wondrous cloths and embroidery;
 sound and movement of his,
 movement and color of hers,
 color and form of his,
 form—and man.

On one side of the vision, sounds and movements are joined together into a unity; on the other side, colors are woven into the form of embroidered cloths. The poet views elements from each side as masculine and feminine. As the two sides come together, the masculine and feminine elements merge into the form of a man.

In describing this vision, the poet again makes use of images drawn from the prophet Ezekiel. The language of the poem alludes to the mystical vision of heavenly beings in Ezekiel Chapter 1. The words *lōma'la* 'above' and *lōma'ita* 'below', *lō'ummatam* 'opposite them', the image of the wings, and the form of a man ('*adam*') all suggest that the poet views this experience as analogous to the revelation of God to Ezekiel.

In the biblical text, after Ezekiel sees the vision he is commanded by God to stand up. A spirit then enters him and causes him to stand on his feet (Ezek 2:1-2). The speaker is also brought up onto her feet, not by a spirit, but by hands which emerge from on high:

As if waves,
 one after the other,
 came to me in this dark night.
 And as if hands were stretched forth from above
 to me below,

seized me,
 held me,
 stood me on my feet,
 and carefully touching with fingers,
 touching and not touching,
 so sad,
 and passed over me caressing,
 from my head to my feet.
 In them I immersed myself,
 one, two,
 as in a pure, flowing spring.
 And a drop from the wet hairs of my head
 fell on my eyes,
 and my eyes became clear
 and enlarged.
 And I was purified, refined,
 and wondrous was I.

The movements of the hands resemble those of a lover caressing the body of his beloved, and this gratifying feeling of being caressed is experienced as an act of Jewish ritual purification through immersion in pure, natural water.

The speaker's prayer and offering have been answered. The offering of her soul to the abysses of silence has transformed those abysses into a mystical revelation of a divine being who reaches down to her to express his love for her. She senses that she no longer needs to confront the abysses of her loneliness and depression, but rather that there exists a divine being who cares about her and will help her to transcend her despair.

Once she fully experiences the reality of that being, she feels herself to have been purified of the evil which she felt within her in the nightmare of the previous poem. The petitionary offering of her soul to the abysses of silence then becomes an offering of thanksgiving to the divine being who has shown his love for her:

I take out my soul,
 and on my palms I lift on high!
 (1922)

Although the divine being in this poem is formed of masculine and feminine elements, he is viewed essentially as a man caressing the body of his female lover. In another poem (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 44-46), the speaker senses the presence of a female divine being who can aid her in her struggle to transcend the abysses of despair.

She asks herself who would be willing to assume the burden of her

suffering, and she speaks of this burden as if it were a physical object which might be sent off into the distance as a flag on a ship's mast or as a sail on a boat. Since she doubts that these actions will serve to relieve her of her suffering, she considers a third alternative:

Or shall I weave the tear of my sadness
to a moon beam dipping in waves?
So it could wear it as an offering
upon the green gates
of a daughter of the abyss, joyous
and light.
As an offering to her from me—
I who am bound to dry land.
As a covenant sign between us,
the strangers.
And she will know when she wanders on waves,
alone,
malicious,
and sad distance brings dew to her eyes
which stray,
that from the severity of trembling longing,
from the green of proud Sivan nights
my eyes were sharpened,
burst through mist,
and I saw her in her wandering
as my friend,
as a faithful sister
whom I chose,
and I stretched forth my hand toward her,
in a wail of choked pain,
on my mountains,
collapsing under me and moving . . .
(1923)

In the previous poem, the abysses of silence were offered a tortured soul as a religious offering; in this poem, a tear of sadness is sent as a sacrificial offering (*minḥa*) to a sea-goddess, whom she calls "daughter of the abyss" (*bat təhom*). Her offering is sent as a sign (*'ot*) that she wishes to enter into a covenant (*bərit*) with this god-like daughter of the abyss.

Although the speaker and the daughter of the abyss appear at first to be strangers, we are told that they have much in common. They are more like friends and sisters than strangers, for the personality of this divine being is a reflection of the personality of the speaker.⁹ Like the speaker,

9. Kartun-Blum (1977, p. 87) refers to the *bat təhom* as a "projection of the yearning 'I' of the poet."

the daughter of the abyss is lonely and sad, yet capable of malicious evil. The speaker finds relief from the burdens of her loneliness and her feelings of guilt by discovering that there exists a divine being who shares her struggle. Just as the male divine being of the previous poem stretched forth his hands to caress her lovingly, so here the stretching forth of her hand is a sign of the friendship which she seeks to establish with the female divine being who is revealed to her.¹⁰

The poems which we have considered reflect Bat-Miriam's attempt in the early 1920s to create for herself a personal mythology which would express the nature of her relationship to the divine. Her encounters with divine beings have much in common with the categories of human religious consciousness proposed by Rudolf Otto (1958, p. 32). One category consists of human beings relating with dread to the "daunting" aspect of the numen. In such a relationship human worship takes "the form of expiation and propitiation . . . the averting or the appeasement of the 'wrath' of the numen." The other category consists of the transformation of the numen into "the object of human search and desire and yearning." In such a human-divine relationship, worship takes on the form of "communion in which the human being seeks to get the numen into his possession."

Bat-Miriam's poetry of the early 1920s conveys a relationship to a demonic divine being based on awe and dread (the evil sun-god), as well as a relationship to a divine being worthy of desire and yearning, with whom one can seek to enter into a communion based on love (the male lover-god and the female friend-goddess). Through the use of biblical terminology which refers to prophetic visions, sacrificial offerings, and covenant signs, the poet portrays her own personal religious experiences as having some connection with traditional Jewish religious experience. However, her discovery of the existence of various images of divinity leads to a rather unorthodox statement of religious faith. The evil sun-god, the male lover-god, and the female friend-goddess are hardly standard features in the belief system of traditional Judaism.¹¹

10. My analysis differs from that of Kartun-Blum (1977, p. 72), who sees the poet's main ideal in love and religious experience during this period as one of Nazirite abstinence from union with the lover or with the divine being. The poet does present this ideal as one way to resolve the tensions aroused in her as she awaits her lover. For example, she concludes one poem dated 1922 (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 31-33) by referring to herself as "I, the lover, / Nazirite / on a lonely Nazirite mountain." Nevertheless, the love poems and the religious poems analyzed above indicate the poet's very strong desire to *unite* with her lover, as well as with a divine being.

11. As we have noted above, erotic imagery is used in reference to human-divine relations in traditional Jewish sources (e.g. Jewish mystical texts and rabbinic interpretations of the Song of Songs). Bat-Miriam's poetry may have been influenced by this trend in traditional Jewish religious literature. However, normative traditional Jewish religious literature does not contain descriptions by a woman of being caressed by God. The images of the confron-

2. The Late 1920s and Early 1930s¹²

At the end of her European period and the beginning of her Land of Israel period, Bat-Miriam began publishing poems in which she wrote of personal religious experiences more directly in terms of the God of Israel. In some of these poems the poet expresses her difficulty in using the forms of traditional Jewish prayer as a means to express her own religious feelings. As a woman, she feels that the traditional Jewish prayers composed by men embody a limited perception of God's spirit. In one poem (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 175–76), the speaker complains of this difficulty directly to God:

My forefathers knew not to establish
Tabernacles of delight for your spirit, God.
And thus my day totters, kneeling,
Like a poor person newly wretched.

They knew not to bear their glory on high
As oaks bear the tops of their branches in honor.—
And dull is my sadness with me,
Like chains rusted of old.

And the comely daughters of my people walked,
Dismal and very confused.
Like the hair under their head-coverings
They secretly hid their soul's desire.

The beauty of pride and exultation
Did not attract their delicate body.
In the shelter of their low houses
They only listened silently to the fruit of their womb.

And their saddened mouth was silent
Like days melting away without glory.
Their prayer took flight and was extinguished
Like a bird that lost its way.

The language of the first five stanzas of the poem suggests that the reason Jewish women are unable to find expression for their spiritual longing in the words of traditional Jewish prayers composed by men is

tation between a woman and a sun-god and of the friendship between a woman and a sea-goddess are even further removed from traditional Jewish ways of speaking about human-divine relations.

12. The religious poetry of this period was collected in the sections titled "Vilon" ("Curtain"), "Peleḳ Dəməma" ("Region of Silence"), and "Maṭmoniyot" ("Treasures") in the collection *Meraḥoq* (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 107–132; 133–154; 173–193).

that the women's perception of the relationship between human erotic inclinations and the divine spirit is radically different from that of the men. By describing feminine spiritual yearning with such words as *hemed* 'delight', *kalot napšan* 'their soul's desire', and *gupan he'anog* 'their delicate body', the poet indicates that for the women, the erotic and the spiritual are intertwined. The men, on the other hand, insist on separating the erotic from the spiritual, for they believe that physical drives have no place in the realm of the spirit. They do not know how "to establish/Tabernacles of delight (*hemed*)" for God's spirit. The women, therefore, are forced to cover their sexually attractive hair and to repress their erotic and spiritual inclinations in order that the men's limited perception of religious experience be preserved.

In the final stanza, the speaker refuses to accept the fate of her Jewish sisters. She rebels against the repression to which they have submitted and demands of the God conceived by the masculine imagination that he accept the full expression of her spiritual and physical drives. As she had rebelliously affirmed the worth of her desires in her early love poetry, and as she had wailed in protest against the evil sun-god, here she defies this God who considers her passions to be evil:

But I unstitched my joy, my sadness,
I—daughter of chastisement and rebellion,
And here I am, as I am,
Bear my mischievous stature!
(1931)

During this period of her poetry, Bat-Miriam finds the acceptance which she has demanded of the God of Israel in the form of a divine being who is revealed to her from his dwelling place beyond this world. The divine being makes himself known by calling to the speaker from a distance:

Expanse pours forth, flowing blue,
Silver lights like sickles in a field.
Who entices as if calling and answering,
To my heart cooing like a wild bird?

Sadness, sadness, without end or meaning,
Like river vapors rising upward.
I kiss the mezuzah of my house and leave,
Like a poor person who entered and suddenly left.

I meet a man who does not sense my approach,
A beast of the field sniffs at me a bit,
Paths like couples resound toward me,
And softly to myself I say:

Allow me, allow me to walk alone,
 To hear "Kedushah," to say "Amen,"
 To whisper suddenly, "May your name be blessed,"
 Seared by holiness, mystery, awe, and grace.

Sadness, sadness. Vast expanse stretching,
 As a reminder of what is beyond the boundary.
 Thus to cease, not to be, do I ask
 In silent pleading on the threshold of boundlessness—

(Bat Miriam, 1932, pp. 135-36; Bat-Miriam, 1963, p. 28; poem dated 1930)

The enticing voice draws her out of her house into a lonely search in nature, removed from other human beings. She attempts to connect with the voice by uttering the words of traditional Jewish communal prayer: "Kedushah," "Amen," "May the name of God be blessed." She turns to the forms of tradition as a means to discover the religious experience for which she longs, but she does so as an individual alienated from the mainstream of Jewish communal life.

In the distance another, boundless world exists beyond this world. This other world, apparently the dwelling place of the divine being who has called to her, represents a realm of existence in which sadness might be overcome. She longs to leave her existence in this world and to be enclosed in the boundlessness of the other world. This longing corresponds to the yearning expressed in earlier poems to discover the existence of a divine being who would allow her to transcend despair by fully accepting her in friendship and love. In this later period, the divine being who calls to her is presented as more powerful, and in a sense more real, than the forces of gloom which captivate her. In the next to last stanza of one poem (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 145-46), she declares:

And greater than the seen is the unseen,
 And more wondrous than existence is the mystery of nothingness—
 Please remember me, my God, and I shall see
 What dwells behind the eye's boundary . . .
 (1930)

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker realizes that she may never enter the other world of boundlessness which is the dwelling place of the divine being who has revealed himself to her. She merely requests permission to stand in silence on the threshold, immersed in the divine spirit emanating from that world:

And may my soul be as one who guards, crouching,
 On the threshold of this secret which was not,
 And the sound of my silence please envelop
 In the breath of your living spirit—
 (1930)

At this point in the development of Bat-Miriam's poetry, the divine being appears less as a god or goddess of the poet's own personal mythology and more as the traditional God of Israel. The poet speaks of the divine being in the language of traditional Jewish theology: *hen* 'grace', *yir'a* 'awe', *sod* 'secret', *'ayin* 'nothingness'.

As in the earlier poetry, the divine being is not always portrayed as masculine during this later period. In one poem (Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 137–38; Bat-Miriam, 1963, p. 29), the speaker uses the second person singular feminine form *'at* to address this being. Like the male divine being of other poems of this period, the female divine being reveals the existence of a distant other world which holds out the promise of the fulfillment of one's yearnings. The revelation of this other world is seen as *bašora* 'tidings', an allusion to the tidings of redemption foreseen by the prophets:

To me you are stirring tidings, commanding
To guard a different essence.
To me you are an unexpected meeting, joyous,
Before the light has yet appeared.

To me you are the revelation of a distant hidden threshold,
Of the existence of the dreamer's certainty,
Of fantasy woven and enveloped,
Of that which cannot be.
(1930)

The divine revelations of this period are experienced as ephemeral in nature. Although the divine being is not always present to her, the speaker expresses her willingness to wait patiently for a future revelation:

You call, return unseen,
And I respond to you.
I am content with your disappearance from me,
I am content with your envelopment in silence.

I am content in the mysteries of distances
To wait for you in vain.
You are the hope of my heart's blood extended
To what will no more come to me.

(Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 137–38; Bat-Miriam, 1963, p. 29; poem dated 1930)

As she contemplates her mortality, however, she feels the divine being has abandoned her as cruelly as the evil sun-god and the God of Israel conceived by the masculine imagination. She asks the divine being how she can praise him when she feels overwhelmed by the threatening "great

abyss" (*təhom rabba*) of death:

How shall I open my lips to you
In praise and in whispered entreaty,
While I am like a ruin in the night,
Wild, dark, agitated.

How shall I plant a peg for a house
And dwell in my house full of rest,
While a great abyss leaps up at my feet,
And my house moves from me in confusion.

And when I close my eyes,
The nights and days pour from them like tears;
I open them—and they burn yellow
Like marred memorial candles.

And like water from a drowned person—
My powers flow cascading.
I stretch forth my hand like a poor person, each finger—
Terror, dread, and fears.

And you I suddenly do not find:
Chaos above my head, gloom—
Like a hidden forest animal,
Escaped in trembling horror.

And how shall I open my lips to you
In praise and in whispered entreaty—
While the deceased is borne up revealed
Like a despairing wild cry—
(Bat-Miriam, 1932, pp. 147–48; poem dated 1930)

The knowledge of impending mortality arouses feelings of insecurity and confusion. She is acutely aware that she is gradually losing her strength with the passage of time, and she is obsessed with images of death and destruction: *hurba*, 'ruin', *nerot-nəšama* 'memorial candles', *niṭba* 'drowned person', *bar-minan* 'deceased'. Although the male lover-god, the female friend-goddess, and the divine being revealed to her from beyond this world were able to save her from the abyss of guilt and loneliness, when she turns to the divine being for help in her confrontation with mortality, there is no response. Divine revelation is replaced by a pervasive atmosphere of gloom and terror.

David Tracy (1979, p. 93) has suggested that one may discover the religious dimension of existence in those human experiences which indicate the limits of "our ordinary experience and language." One may recognize this religious dimension most clearly "in such limit experiences as (negatively) anxiety or (positively) fundamental trust in the worthwhileness of

our existence." In order to relate Tracy's remarks to the two categories of human religious consciousness proposed by Rudolf Otto, it may be said that the "limit experience" of anxiety would lead to the discovery of a wrathful divinity which inspires human awe and dread, while the "limit experience" of trust in one's worthiness would give birth to the discovery of a loving divinity with which the human being would seek communion.

In her early poetry, Yochaved Bat-Miriam attempted to find the appropriate way to respond to her "limit experiences" of anxiety aroused by unrequited love, feelings of guilt and loneliness, and fear of death on the one hand, and the belief that she is fundamentally worthy on the other hand. We have seen a significant number of poems in which she chose to write of her feelings of anxiety and worthiness in terms of the religious dimension of human existence.¹³

In this religious poetry, Bat-Miriam's central concern is to overcome her awe and dread of a wrathful divinity who rejects her for her passions and abandons her to death. She is able to transform this attitude when she realizes that her passions are not really opposed by divinity, but are actually a part of it. Divinity is also passionate; divinity also seeks friendship and love. Paradoxically, the very passions perceived to be the cause of alienation between the poet and the divine being become the source of unity between them.¹⁴

This communion with the divine is experienced by the poet only on occasion. Much of the time the poet cannot discern the presence of an accepting divine being, but rather feels abandoned by divinity. Nevertheless, the poet does declare her faith that the fleeting moments of the divine confirmation of her worth represent a higher truth than the more pervasive experience that she has been rejected by divinity. Her prayer is that she continue to be privileged to receive the revelation of that truth:

Please remember me, my God, and I shall see
What dwells behind the eye's boundary . . .

13. Bat-Miriam is not unique among twentieth century Hebrew poets in writing about religious experience. A wide variety of personal confrontations between the poet and a divine being can be found in the works of many of the most important modern Hebrew poets. Writing over three decades ago, S. Halkin (1970, p. 179) cited the importance of studying religious themes in modern Hebrew literature in order to correct the mistaken prevalent notion that the literature is solely secular in nature. At that time he claimed that "the historians and critics themselves have developed this view of the nonreligious character of Hebrew literature so successfully that it may take decades to correct their error and place the so-called secularism of this literature within its legitimate bounds." Although since then some critics have undertaken to focus on the religious dimension of modern Hebrew literature, more studies of this dimension are needed to complete the task set forth by Halkin.

14. The issue of whether the poet's desires and passions create a barrier of guilt or are a source of unity between herself and her lover is found, as we have seen, in Bat-Miriam's early love poetry.

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